

# Reality of benchmarking at the local government level in Slovakia

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## Abstract

*Outcomes of realized researches in service benchmarking at the local self government level in Slovakia have showed the limited and merely dummy implementation of this method. The local self government bodies express the ambition to introduce the method of benchmarking in performance management. However, this ambition alone is not sufficient for producing the expected results of benchmarking in higher effectiveness and quality in service delivery. The goal of this paper is to confirm the problem of dummy benchmarking implementation in service management at local government level by outcomes of a primary research realized in 141 self government bodies. The analytical part provides selected data trying to face the relatively optimistic account of benchmarking using in service delivery management given by the attitudes of the local authorities' representatives towards usage of benchmarking with the outcomes of the service delivery analysis targeting the expected results of benchmarking usage – the proper make or buy decision regarding the effectiveness and quality services. This unique approach comparing the original collected survey data on expressed benchmarking using with supplementary data on services delivery enable to check the reality of benchmarking in service delivery management.*

## Keywords

*Benchmarking, local government, service, performance, contracting out services, Slovakia.*

**JEL Classification:** H83, H44

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## 1. Introduction

The introduction of performance evaluation, performance management and performance financing schemes in public sector did not produce the expected results and even creates perverse effects in many cases (Andrews et al., 2006; Bourne et al., 2000; Boyne, 2002; Carter, 1991; Hudson et al., 2001; Joyce, 2000; Van Dooren, 2006).

The causes of such failures include inadequate implementation expertise or merely dummy implementation (Macpherson, 2001; Randma-Liiv and Viks, 2004; Nemec et al., 2005; Tonnisson and Wilson, 2007). The risks connected with the improper imple-

mentation of performance management tools are much higher because of inadequate policy and management capacities and limited resources and experience (Coombes and Verheien 1997; Nemec et al., 2008; Poister, 2003; Radnor and McGuire, 2004; Šebo, 2009).

One of the performance management tools, proper implementation of which can increase effectiveness in public sector, is benchmarking (Allen and Tommasi, 2001; Balážová, 2006; Čapková, 2010; Epstein, 1984; McGuire, 1999; Meričková et al., 2008; Nemec et al. 2005; Široký et al., 2004). However, there is a problem of dummy benchmarking implementation in service management at local government level.

The goal of the paper is to confirm the problem of dummy benchmarking implementation in service management at local government level by checking the data mapping the attitudes of the local authorities' representatives towards using benchmarking with the outcomes of the service delivery analysis targeted the expected results of benchmarking using – the proper make or buy decision regarding the effectiveness and quality services.

Theoretical background briefly demonstrates the benchmarking method implementation in public management and analytical part provides basic selected data on the use of benchmarking and its outcomes in management delivery of services financed from public sources, namely at the local government level. The research survey was realized in 141 self government bodies.

## 2. Benchmarking in public sector

The basic of the term benchmarking is the English word benchmark, which can be translated as a standard, comparative measure. The last sense of this word represents the concept of the benchmarking as the technique substantial performance improvement in organisation through processes comparison and analysis focused on the most optimal processes arrangements identification most accurately (Široký et al., 2004).

The benchmarking theory is built upon performance comparison, gap identification and changes in the management process (Watson, 1993; Camp, 1989; Karlöf and Östblom, 1993).

By reviewing the benchmarking literature (Camp, 1989; Zairi, 1992; Smith et al., 1993; Rogers et al., 1995), it seems obvious that benchmarking helps organisations to understand where they have strengths and weaknesses and to improve their competitive advantage, which brings improvements in quality, productivity and efficiency.

In other words, benchmarking is also a process of finding what the best practices are and then proposing what performance should be in the future (Camp, 1989). The three principles of benchmarking are maintaining quality, customer satisfaction and continuous improvement (Watson, 1993).

Benchmarking in public sector refers to a continuous process comparing a public organisation's performance against that of the best practices considering critical citizens needs and determining what should be improved. Implementing of this methods in the public management contribute to competitive environment not only between public organisations, but also between public and private sector in public order realis-

ing, which helps to increase the effectiveness in public sector.

However, some definitions of benchmarking in public sector (Allen and Tomassi, 2001) refer to process of continuously performance comparing and measuring against defined public services standard (s) to assess performance, which can be very beneficial just in public financed public services delivery. Benchmarking can be used to expose areas where improvement is needed, identify processes activities that are carried out better in other organizations and test whether measures taken to improve the efficiency or effectiveness of programs have been successful.

This method should be used mainly when there are defined no standards in public service delivery which have to be met. Similarly, if there are defined the standards in public services delivery, it will be very useful for organisation to know, what is its situation in comparison with the best providers of particular service.

Ammon (2001) defines three main techniques of benchmarking within the public sector:

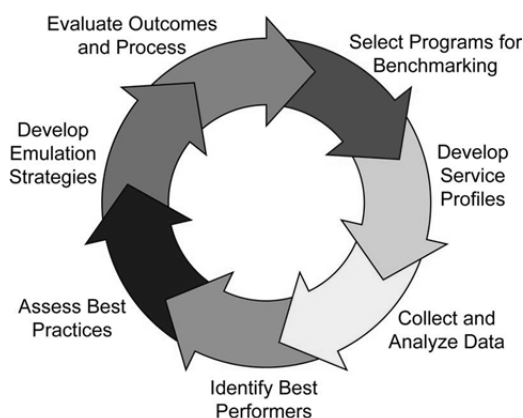
- A. A high-level comparison applies to management processes used in organisation. It consists comparison of the management techniques in organisation with other organisations, private sector or abroad.
- B. Process benchmarking applies to the processes and activities used to turn inputs into outputs. It consists either of benchmarking processes used by the organization concerned against processes used in comparable organizations, or against processes as defined in a standard. The identification of root causes leads to achievement of superior performance.
- C. Results benchmarking applies to actual results (outputs and outcomes). It consists of comparing the actual performance of different organizations using performance indicators, or of comparing actual performance against certain performance standards. It helps to identify gaps in performance.

The main types of benchmarking are increasingly seen as complementary methods that can be used to reinforce each other. For example, results benchmarking can be used to identify discrepancies in results and process benchmarking can help explain why these discrepancies exist. Process benchmarking without results benchmarking tends to become inward-looking, leading to a focus on enhancing processes for their own sake, without checking whether or not the changes are relevant for users of public services and stakeholders.

Benchmarking can be undertaken by range of tools. These include comparing published information,

comparing processes and practices through one-to-one interaction between parties, and auditing or review processes in which the relative strengths and weakness of various organization's or organizational practices are assessed and ranked.

If the purpose of the benchmarking process is to identify good practices, several steps (see Figure 1) that combine a number of the above activities are involved. For example, first ranking the performance of organisations in terms of appropriate indicators, then identifying those organisations which consistently achieve outstanding results or significant improvements over time, and lastly learning through direct interaction with organisation representatives about how these achievements or improvements have been secured (Stapenhurst, 2009; Nenadál et al., 2011).



**Figure 1** Benchmarking process

Source: Šíroký et al. (2004)

Benchmarking may be used as a tool for both evaluation and continuous improvement. It is related to a number of management techniques, such as total quality management and process re-engineering, and for performance comparison and programme evaluation.

There are many possible problems affecting successful benchmarking in public sector as time constraints, competitive barriers, cost, lack of both management commitment and professional human resources, resistance to change, poor planning and short term expectations (Bendell et al., 1993; Karlöf and Östblom, 1993).

A poorly executed benchmarking exercise will result in a waste of financial and human resources, as well as time. Ineffectively executed benchmarking projects may have tarnished an organisation's image (Elmuti and Kathawala, 1997). Moreover, there is no single 'best practice' because it varies from one person to another and every organisation differs in terms of mission, culture, environment and technological tools available. Thus, there are risks involved in benchmarking others as well as in adopting new standards

into one's own organisation. The 'best practice' should be perceived or accepted to be among those practices producing superior outcomes and being judged as good examples within the area. Finally, benchmarking findings may remove the heterogeneity of public services since standards will themselves become globally standardised and attempts to produce differentiation may fail (Cox and Thompson, 1998).

Using benchmarking on a selective base should be considered in last transitive countries and especially on municipal level in public service delivering process (Balážová, 2006; Hronec and Štrangfeldová, 2009; McGuire, 1999; Meričková et al., 2008; Nemec et al. 2005; Šíroký et al., 2004).

The plural system of public service providers in public sector has been gradually formed in 80' and 90' through the public service contracting in concrete version (for e.g. Compulsory Competitive Tendering in Great Britain in 1990) (Hoxley, 2000). The basic condition of this duty is equality if all property forms in public bid competition, which is also one of main trends in modern public sector reform (Nemec, 2002). The experiences with implementation of this competitive design focused on increasing of public service delivery effectiveness are positive.

Countries, where this design is developed and where the effectiveness comparison between internal and external public service delivery forms was obligatory, move gradually to higher qualitative motivation form of public institution in searching the optimal rate between inputs and outputs – Best Value. Best value policy can be briefly define as an engagement statement for public authority with competency in the public service providing to deliver this service in extend and quality, which meet the public needs and fit used public sources (Sanderson, 2002). According to Magd and Curry (2003, pp. 263) the main goal of best value policy is to develop the performance management in the public service delivery system with the benchmarking implementing as performance measurement method.

Implementation of the benchmarking method in the public management was recommended on the basic of main ideas of CAF (Common Assessment Framework model) by European Foundation for Quality Management, The Research Institute for Public Administration at the German University of Administrative Science, Public Administration Institute in Maastricht.<sup>1</sup> CAF is a result of co-operation among the EU Ministers responsible for Public Ad-

<sup>1</sup> Conclusions of the 9th NISPAcee Annual Conference: Government, Market and Civil Sector: The Search for a Productive Partnership, 9 (Gajdošová, 2001).

ministration It is jointly developed under the aegis of the Innovative Public Services Group, a working group of national experts set up by the Directors-General in order to promote exchanges and cooperation where it concerned innovative ways of modernizing government and public service delivery in EU Member States. A pilot version was presented in May 2000 and a first revised version was launched in 2002. A CAF Resource Centre was created at the European Institute of Public Administration in Maastricht following the decision of Directors-Generals in charge of public service.

Despite of the fact, that this program works relative long time and we should be theoretically able to evaluate its outcomes in increasing public management quality, the implementing of the benchmarking method in public management practice has a stochastic and merely dummy character in some last transitive countries. Slovakia is one of these countries as we demonstrate in following part.

### 3. Reality of benchmarking at the local government level in Slovak republic

Following analytical part provides original collected survey data from own research trying to assess practical aspects of benchmarking method using in services delivery at local government level in Slovakia. We use a quantitative approach to investigate the research question – real implementing benchmarking method in management of service delivery at the local government level. Namely we focus at the local public services (waste, cemeteries, public green areas, communications, public lighting) and the internal service in local administration offices (cleaning, catering, maintenance, information technology, transport, security).

All these service are fully or partly financed from public budget and local government is responsible for the level and quality of services in relation to public expenditures. Government can realize this responsibility by hiring the private for-profit and non-profit firms to produce the service - contract out the services. Contracting may, but need not, improve individual choice, cost-effectiveness and the quality of delivery, equity and to some extend also expenditure control. There is several conditions that have been fulfil to achieve mentioned benefit of contracting – one of them is the implementation of regular testing of all existing arrangements of public service delivery based on the benchmarking method in service delivery management.

The studies outcomes related to using benchmarking in public management in Slovak conditions Beblavý and Sičáková-Beblavá, 2006; Meričková and

Sičáková-Beblavá, 2008; Balážová, 2006; Fantová Šumpíková and Rousek, 2009; Meričková and Majlingová 2005; Meričková and Nemec, 2007; Meričková, Nemec, Ochrana, 2008; Meričková et al., 2010; Nemec et al., 2005; Pavel, 2006) proposes that implementing of the benchmarking in public management practice has a stochastic and merely dummy character.

We try to answer the question of real using the benchmarking method in delivery management of the local public services and internal services in local public administration offices by confronting outcomes of two own researches realized in the same sample of municipalities (Table 1) from the years 2010 to 2011. One of these researches provides evidence on the attitudes of the local authorities' representatives towards using benchmarking in service delivery management and the other one provides the outcomes of service delivery effectiveness analysis.

**Table 1** Research sample

Municipalities by size (population)	Research sample	Total number of municipalities in SR (%)
0 – 999	34	1.77
1 000 – 4 999	58	6.96
5 000 – 9 999	17	28.33
10 000 – 19 999	12	37.50
20 000 – 49 999	14	48.28
50 000 and more	6	50.00
Total	141	4.88

The methodology of the local authorities' representatives attitudes survey was developed on the studies that examined the quality of municipal benchmarking in new EU member states: Estonia (Tonnison and Wilson, 2007) and Slovakia (Meričková, et al., 2008; Meričková et al., 2010). All studies were published in Public Management Review. The outcomes of research focused on the attitudes of the local authorities' representatives towards using benchmarking in service delivery management gives a relatively optimistic account of benchmarking using in service delivery management (Table 2).

Almost 44% of municipalities disagree with pronouncement number 2 *Resources allocated to local government form central government to deliver local public services are sufficient*. Local authorities should seek opportunities for strategic alliances and partnerships in the delivery of services with private sector by contracting out.

According expressed accordance with the pronouncement number 4 *The municipal employees are encouraged to facilitate private sector involvement in the local public services delivery* (more than 65% municipalities agree), they really do this. If it is true,

the scale of contracting will increase. However, data in Table 3 does not correspond with it.

The outcomes of the research of service delivery effectiveness, focused on where should the implementation of benchmarking increase effectiveness, are much less optimistic.

If benchmarking was really used in service delivery management, the scale of contracting should increase. The real scale of contracting has increased only in cases of one of local public services (waste) and one of internal services (catering).

Local authority must decide whether to produce goods and services internally or to acquire them from external sources – contract out service. This make or

buy decision has been made on the comparison of the costs and the quality of in-house production and contracting out services at least. Local authorities' representatives claim that the performance benchmarking is used in this decision – almost 70% of them strongly agree with pronouncements about comparison of the cost and quality of in-house production and contracting out services (Table 2 – pronouncements number 5, 6, 7, 8). If they do performance benchmarking and decide to buy services (Table 2 – pronouncements number 4), the contracting out services will increase the cost effectiveness and quality service delivery. However, the reality is different (Tables 4 and 5).

**Table 2** The attitudes of the local authorities' representatives towards using benchmarking in service delivery management (%)

Pronouncement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Strongly agree	Agree
1) My local authority continually seek improvements in service delivery.	1.42	2.84	56.03	39.72
2) Resources allocated to local government to deliver local public services are sufficient.	14.18	43.97	41.13	1.42
3) The municipal employees are encouraged to question the continued citizen's need for each local public service to be provided.	2.13	29.08	60.28	8.51
4) The municipal employees are encouraged to facilitate private sector involvement in the local public services delivery.	0.71	19.15	65.25	14.18
5) My authority compares the costs of in-house production and contracting out its internal services (cleaning, catering, etc.).	1.42	21.28	67.38	9.93
6) My authority compares the costs of its local public services with other local authorities.	0.71	14.89	72.34	11.35
7) My authority compares the quality of in-house production and contracting out its internal services (cleaning, catering, etc.).	1.42	24.11	65.96	8.51
8) My authority compares the quality of its local public services with other local authorities.	0.00	24.11	64.54	9.93
9) My local authority is citizen's need-oriented.	0.71	2.84	75.89	20.57
10) My local authority delivers high quality local public services.	0.00	9.22	80.85	9.93
11) The municipal employees are committed to continuous service improvement.	2.84	3.55	65.25	28.37

**Table 3** The scale of contracting out local public services and internal services in local offices (%)

Local public services	Municipalities by size (population)						Average
	0–999	1 000–4 999	5 000–9 999	10 000–19 999	20 000–49 999	50 000 and more	
Waste	93.94	79.00	52.94	45.45	71.43	100.00	73.79
Public lighting	48.48	55.00	56.25	27.27	71.43	83.33	56.96
Communications	42.42	68.00	31.25	18.18	57.14	66.67	47.28
Public green areas	6.06	4.00	12.50	36.36	64.29	83.33	34.42
Cemeteries	0.00	5.00	25.00	54.55	7.69	50.00	23.71
Internal services							
Cleaning	0.00	2.00	58.80	25.00	7.14	66.67	26.60
Catering	20.59	50.00	94.12	83.33	100.00	60.00	68.01
Maintenance	20.59	50.00	35.30	25.00	35.70	0.00	27.76
Information technology	75.76	65.00	47.06	16.67	42.86	33.33	46.78
Transport	24.00	13.00	18.75	18.18	35.71	0.00	18.27
Security	37.50	36.00	35.71	16.67	38.46	33.33	32.94

A lesser cost-effectiveness of contracting out local public services and a higher cost-effectiveness of contracting out internal services is confirmed according to the table. If the municipalities really used the performance benchmarking, the scale of contracting out internal services should be much higher than the scale of contracting out local public services is. The real scale is contradictory (Table 3).

The situation is very similar in quality of services. The local authorities' representatives claim that, the quality benchmarking is used in service delivery management (Statements 7 and 8 in Table 2) and the local authorities continually to seek improvements in service delivery (Statement 1 in Table 2) through facilitating private sector involvement in the services delivery (Statement 4 in Table 2).

However, the contracting out services does not produce higher quality services (Table 5).

Table 5 presents the quality comparison of contracting-out and internal delivery arrangements of the analyzed services in the selected municipalities. The citizens' satisfaction with local public services and employee's satisfaction with internal services is the benchmark of services quality. Data on the quality service are provided by the users – citizens and employee through the questionnaire (the sample was small, thus we accept that our summarized data are of very preliminary character).

The local authorities' representatives claim that, the performance benchmarking is used in service delivery management (table 2), but the outcomes of research on service delivery arrangement are contradictory (tables 3, 4, 5) to these claims. One of the

possible reasons is that implementing of the benchmarking in public management practice has a stochastic and merely dummy character.

#### 4. Conclusion

The answers of local authorities' representatives on the usage of benchmarking in service delivery management suggested that they challenge existing service provision, compare the costs and quality of their services, as well as they are willing to compete and are predisposed to private-sector involvement in the provision of local public services.

However, this relatively optimistic picture of benchmarking in local public service delivery management was face with the outcomes of the service delivery analysis targeted the expected results of benchmarking using – the proper make or buy decision regarding the effectiveness and quality services improvement.

Conclusions are clear. Outcomes of our research have not approved the positive expected results of benchmarking in promoting changes and delivers improvements in quality, productivity and efficiency of service delivery. In other words, this cross-checking of data from different surveys shows the reality of the stochastic and merely dummy character of benchmarking implementation in local public management practice in Slovakia.

Possible solutions for this situation might be the implementation of regular testing of all existing arrangements of public service delivery; the imple-

**Table 4** The cost of service contracting in % (internal form is 100%)

Local public services	Municipalities by size (population)						Average
	–999	1 000–4 999	5 000–9 999	10 000–19 999	20 000–49 999	50 000 and more	
Waste	43.43	54.42	82.27	113.89	129.35	266.61	115.00
Public lighting	105.58	162.22	97.74	60.92	69.76	156.12	108.72
Communications	333.53	35.23	27.29	25.96	58.48	25.70	84.37
Public green areas	268.18	79.57	23.46	108.26	89.61	124.91	115.67
Cemeteries	(–)	380.73	105.59	37.06	143.23	47.01	142.72
Internal services							
Cleaning	0.00	43.20	72.17	35.86	48.80	197.96	66.33
Catering	19.66	82.45	20.09	111.05	0.00	97.15	55.06
Maintenance	6.38	206.33	93.72	92.44	42.43	0.00	73.55
Information technology	12.94	181.05	76.86	185.30	47.92	115.07	103.19
Transport	2.05	196.03	108.00	45.07	71.29	0.00	70.41
Security	15.73	17.94	14.03	17.86	2.62	11.99	13.36

Note: Table 4 trades off in-house and contracting out on the basic costs of service delivery per inhabitant (local public services) and pre employee (internal services). In-house service production costs amount is taken as 100%. If the value in the table is higher than 100, contracting will be less cost effective.

mentation of accrual accounting in the public sector, which make the development of modern management approaches in the public sector possible; the implementation of actions proving public procurement ethics, and support of effective training of public servants in the area of modern public management methods.

**Table 5** The cost of service contracting in % (internal form is 100%)

Local public services	Service delivery alternative	Average
Waste	internal form	57.00
	contracting	68.76
Public lighting	internal form	65.66
	contracting	69.12
Communications	internal form	52.57
	contracting	46.55
Public green areas	internal form	70.39
	contracting	59.08
Cemeteries	internal form	71.20
	contracting	65.33
Cleaning	internal form	73.08
	contracting	62.89
Catering	internal form	64.53
	contracting	77.45
Maintenance	internal form	70.87
	contracting	66.77
Information technology	internal form	75.43
	contracting	68.01
Transport	internal form	70.85
	contracting	57.63
Security	internal form	65.30
	contracting	76.92

Note: Citizens and employees have evaluated the service quality by expressing their satisfaction with the quality of service on the following scale:

Absolutely satisfied	100 %	↓
Satisfied	80 %	
More satisfied than unsatisfied	60 %	
More unsatisfied than satisfied	40 %	
Unsatisfied	20 %	
Absolutely unsatisfied	0 %	

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